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ABSTRACT

An important factor the technical writer must keep in mind is the makeup of the intended audience. Students should be encouraged to identify as many specific characteristics as possible about an intended audience. It is also important that students comprehend the relationship between audience and use of stylistic elements. By also being sensitive to their audience, students' technical writing teachers can design courses that will help students learn to write effectively for different audiences. Some possible assignments include: asking students to look at more than one technical writing manual and to compare definitions of technical writing and how it differs from other types of writing; asking students to look at a specialized magazine or journal and to identify the intended audience, evaluate the language level, and note how the various elements are directed toward the specific audience; selecting an article and asking students to rewrite it for a different, specific, audience; assigning a preliminary proposal for a report in which students are required to specify the intended audience; and having students give oral presentations on their reports, keeping in mind that the class is a different audience than the one for whom the report was written. (TJ)

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"PURPOSES MISTOOK FALL'N ON TH' INVENTORS HEAD"

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Although Horatio's comment on the tragic events in Shakespeare's Hamlet (V,ii) is not relevant in a literary sense to the subject of this paper, it does have a certain rhetorical significance. Surely, if an inventor (writer) misjudges his purposes (audience), his creation (communication) will fall'n on th' inventor's head.

This paper is about verbal ecology. Ecology, of course, is the relationship between organisms and their environment. By analogy, verbal ecology would mean the relationship between written and oral communications and their environment. In this paper the definition is further delimited to the relationship between written communication and one dimension of the environment, audiences.

Despite what has been written and said about the importance of identifying audience characteristics before determining the shape and form of a particular written communication, I sense that, too often, the analysis is little more than a mechanical procedure, an application of a categorical check list. When used in this way, audience analysis becomes a superficial activity that loses its value as an integral part of the communication process. However, if categorical analysis is related to strategies, or design, or intention, it helps illuminate ways in which language patterns affect rhetorical objectives. As Barbara Harris has said, "What we want students to do is not just to write well for some ideally imagined uninformed audience, but to gauge as intelligently as they can in every case the degree of their audience's information, and to write to that audience." (p 631)

Students, then, should be encouraged to identify as many specific characteristics as possible about an intended audience in every case in order to make intelligent, rational rhetorical decisions about how to present information. As Kinneavy has observed, "...information is only information to somebody, what is information to one audience is not information to another ...it must exist in sufficient context to be meaningful, and it must...not be self-evident." (p 93)

Many students have difficulty comprehending the relationship between audience and use of stylistic elements. It is not easy for them to understand that language symbols and how they are structured reflect attitudes and intent. Many are not aware that rhetorical style should mirror a writer's perception and assessment of his audience. They do not know that even within grammatical constraints, a writer makes structural and semantical choices that he thinks will achieve his purpose. We need to help them learn that "Language is not a purely passive instrument...(that) while you are doing something with it, it is doing something with you, or with your intention. It does not exactly fight back; rather it has a set of postures and balances which modify your thrusts and holds...friction occurs whenever a given unit of the system of grammar is

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tending to say one thing while the semantic meaning and the general organization are tending to say another." (Weaver, p 270) Students need to be made aware that language is active, and its user must be sensitive to its inherent strengths and mobility lest it subtly lead the reader in a direction not intended. They should be reassured that unlike Lewis Carroll's prodigious Humpty Dumpty, we are not all, inherently, masters of the temperamental elements of language, but we can learn to be.

We instructors must assume some of the responsibility for the indifference to language we often encounter among students. In technical writing, for example, we tend to rely on rigid interpretations of word-concepts, and have a preoccupation with objective criteria that may well preclude the important dimension of relationships among variables in the communication process. We sometimes stress objectivity and rigor at the expense of holistic value. "The needs of our actual life are so imperative that the sense of vision becomes highly specialized in their service. With an admirable economy we see only so much as is needful for our purposes; but this is in fact very little, just enough to recognize and identify each object or person; that done they go into our mental catalogue and are no more really seen. In actual life the normal person really only reads the labels as it were on the objects around him and troubles no further. Almost all the things which are useful in any way put on more this cap of invisibility." (Langer, p 238)

To help lift this "cap of invisibility," I suggest we need to be more sensitive to our immediate audience: our students. What do they know about the complexities of the communication process when they come to us? Usually, very little. Before they can begin to understand it, and before we can expect to sensitize them to other's needs, we must be sensitive to theirs.

When did you last think of your students as the audience for a communication process in which you are actively involved (the classroom)? When did you last adjust your strategies and rhetorical objectives to their need for information and their capabilities? Many of our students have a residual negative attitude toward writing because of unpleasant prior experiences. Some have avoided any kinds of communications courses, and thus, are weak in basic skills. They are fearful and anxious. They may be passively or actively hostile. Some consider a course in technical writing extraneous, as neither a course relevant to their major, nor a "real" humanities course. They are not sure what it has to do with their future endeavors. On the other hand, there are always students who like to write, who are competent and confident, as well as those who are eager to learn and improve. In every case, they are a mixed group. I suggest that we should be constantly aware of and respond to the changing dynamics within student groups. This, of course, means we must be open and flexible within the obvious constraints of realistic course objectives and time limitations. But, if we are telling our students that the way to develop effective written communications is by understanding the relationship between audience needs and expectations and rhetorical strategies, then it seems reasonable that we should practice what we teach. As we assess our audience, we should help our students assess theirs by using audience analysis in technical writing as a cohesive strategy "...for the difficult, necessary task of learning to adjust vocabulary and other stylistic elements to an audience with tact, humility, and appropriateness--but without hypocrisy, without being false." (Hall, p 31)

To illustrate how the relationship between audiences and various technical communications may be developed as a cohesive strategy in a basic technical writing course, I have assembled a number of sample assignments. They have been freely adapted from other people's suggestions, and from various texts and articles. I hope they will be especially useful to people who are just beginning to teach courses in technical writing. Audience analysis is the focal point of each assignment, and it is from the analysis that rhetorical strategies and choices evolve. Although each assignment is useful and demonstrates different elements of the process, it is the cumulative value of using audience analysis as a unifying strategy that results in fewer mistakes "...fall'n on th' inventors heads."

SUGGESTED ASSIGNMENTS

An Initial Assignment

Hand out a bibliography of books on technical writing available in your library. Assign specific books to individuals or place selected books on reserve. Ask students to: 1. examine the table of contents, 2. read the first chapter (or whichever chapter defines and describes technical writing, 3. read the chapter on audience analysis. Ask students to write: 1. the definition of technical writing in the library book and the definition in their text, 2. a list of similarities and dissimilarities between the library book and the text. Tell them to be prepared in the next class period to discuss: 1. what they have discovered about technical writing, 2. how technical writing differs from other types of writing, and 3. what they perceive the role of the audience to be, that is, the relationship of the audience to written communication.

Journal Article Analysis

Bring various magazines to class: Scientific American, Technology Review, Smithsonian, New Yorker, Harpers, Atlantic Monthly, Road and Track, and other magazines and journals in special fields. (If you do not have magazines available, ask students to bring them.) The purpose of this assignment is to identify the type of audience for whom the magazine is intended by examining various elements, some of which are: the cover (title, publication dates, design), table of contents, circulation information, advertisements, letters to the editor, editorials, type face, layout, graphics. Students may work individually, but it is preferable to have them work in groups of 3 or 4, with each member of a group examining a different issue of the same publication. (Advantages: initiates within group dynamics, and friendly competitive inter-group spirit. When used early in the course, this activity promotes a relaxed environment, and reduces anxiety.) This activity is used over a period of several weeks. On the first day, students work together for a specified period of time. Then each group identifies the intended audience for the publication it has examined, and must give evidence to support its conclusion. Encourage other groups to question and challenge the evidence.

Subsequent analyses of specific articles are related to reading assignments in the text and discussions. Use the articles by having

students examine organizational features (titles, abstracts, introductions, conclusions, thesis sentences, paragraph development, transitions, subtitles); language level (vocabulary, abstract vs concrete language, sentence length, types of sentences, transitions, coherence devices, paragraph length); rhetorical devices (comparison/contrast causal analysis, examples, etc.) and graphics. All these features are examined, of course, in relation to the intended audience. By having groups analyze different types of magazines, they begin to develop a sense of how different authors have made rhetorical choices appropriate to different audiences.

The culmination of this activity is to ask each student to select an article written about a technical or scientific subject and to identify the audience for whom it is written by examining all the previously mentioned features. This will test the student's ability to transfer information and apply it. WARNING: This part of the assignment is time consuming for the instructor, since each article must be read carefully before the student's analysis may be fairly evaluated. (The student must attach a xeroxed copy of the original article to his paper.) ALTERNATE: Select one issue of a magazine (Scientific American, for example). Have all students work with the magazine and do the final assignment on a specific article in the magazine. This method will reduce the time it takes to evaluate the analyses considerably.

Rewrite a Journal Article

For this assignment ask the students to select an article on a technical or scientific subject that is close to the upper limits of their comprehension. Have them write a paragraph or two identifying the audience and justifying their conclusion. Next, have them rewrite the original article for a different type of audience. Give them suggestions for age ranges, educational backgrounds as well as other demographic information. Use a classroom period as an exploratory/planning session during which students will select a specific type of audience and will consider various rhetorical possibilities for developing the paper. Encourage them to choose readers outside the academic environment. Encourage students to articulate their ideas and seek feedback from others. Interact with students, but avoid making decisions for them. Suggest that they ask a representative person in the audience they have selected to read the rough draft or finished paper and make comments. This is usually a stimulating assignment that demonstrates quite dramatically the kinds of rhetorical decisions that must be made to adjust information for different audiences.

Preliminary Proposal (for a major report)

Regardless of the type of major report you may ask your students to write, it is a good idea to assign a preliminary proposal. In addition to other obvious advantages, it forces the student to select an audience category. Research on the topic will be easier for the student if possible materials are reviewed in relation to a specific audience context. If the student tells you he wishes to write for

the intelligent but uninformed lay reader, insist that some demographic information be given: educational range, rural/urban background and so on. It often helps to ask the student to express reasons why the subject would be of interest to the intended audience and to have them explain the direct and indirect relationships.

Progress Report (on the major report)

By the time you call for a progress report, the student should have completed much of the necessary research. In addition to defining the scope and plan of development, the student should have enough information to give you a more detailed audience analysis. Ask the student to consider how technical jargon, interpretation of data and statistics and abstract concepts will be treated in the final report. Ask what types of rhetorical devices will probably be most useful and why. What kinds of graphics will be included and why?

Sometime during the period that students are preparing a major report it is useful to have them discuss their plans orally or to exchange rough drafts of what they have written. In heterogeneous groups, especially, each student is a different audience and can often give perceptive, helpful suggestions.

Mechanism and Process Descriptions

Whether these descriptions are given as separate assignments or are combined, it is very important that students do a preliminary audience analysis. The treatment of the material, how it is developed and expressed, will be influenced by whether the descriptions are instructions for the neophyte, the technician or the skilled amateur, or if they are general descriptions for different groups of lay readers, professionals or decision makers. They may be objective/informative, subjective/persuasive, or both. They may be structural, functional or essentially relational. The audience should be determined in advance either by the instructor or student, so the descriptions will be appropriately developed to elicit the kind of response intended.

Oral Reports

As a final assignment, have students give an oral presentation on their major written report. Because of time constraints, these presentations will usually be 10-12 minutes long. The audience will usually be the other students in the class, probably a heterogeneous group. It is likely that they will not have the same information as the intended reader(s) of the written report. To speak to this different audience, the presenter will need to select and organize the material carefully so major premises and conclusions will be clear. Technical jargon should be avoided or definitions should be given. Strong reliance on examples, analogies and clear reasoning should be encouraged. Require that visuals be used. If tables, graphs and diagrams are adapted from the original paper, help students figure proper proportions so the information may be

seen and read easily by everyone in the room. Encourage demonstrations and audience involvement.

Miscellaneous (Quizzes, In Class and Take Home Activities)

There are several short assignments that may be used to emphasize and reenforce the relationship between stylistic elements and audiences. Two assignments are listed below as examples.

1. Give students a selection of words: abstract, concrete or both. Ask them to write definitions of any one word for three different readers: a nine year old, a high school student, a business executive (There are obviously many possible combinations). Then, ask them to expand the definition for any one of the three readers by using examples, comparison/contrast, deductive/inductive reasoning and so on. (Emphasize one, two or a combination)

2. Design several problems that include statistical data. Ask students to develop graphic representations of the data (tables, line graphs, etc.) that will be most appropriate for a specific audience. Require a short paper in which the data are interpreted, and a justification is given for why a particular type of graphic was chosen for the selected audience.

Conclusion

The types of sample assignments suggested here, it should be emphasized again, are for a basic technical writing course typically offered in the junior division. If you also offer an advanced course, the addition of coordinated projects with other academic departments and industries and agencies in the community is exciting and productive.

Above all, remember your audience: your students. Keep them actively involved in a rich variety of experiences that make clear that communication objectives can be realized through the intelligent choice of rhetorical strategies and stylistic elements appropriate to various audiences. We are all concerned about the quality of our environment; let us make a responsible contribution to that environment through our commitment to verbal ecology.

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